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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study are: (1) to investigate the attitudes of Florida Extension Service specialists toward in-service education evaluation; (2) to determine the extent to which extension specialists are evaluating in-service education programs for which they have responsibility; (3) to determine the kinds of in-service education evaluation information considered by Extension specialists to be important; and (4) to determine the uses being made of the evaluation information collected. Data were collected through open-ended telephone interviews with twenty state extension specialists. Interviewees were selected from 35 specialists listed in the 1983-84 Florida Cooperative Extension Service Professional Development Opportunities Booklet. They were asked to describe evaluative information that was most useful to them with regard to their in-service education programs and to list ways in which the information was being used. Information collected was primarily perceptual and reactive, but it encompassed a variety of program aspects. Of importance to specialists, in order of rank, were the following: (1) participant perceptions of the usefulness of the content of the training; (2) perceptions of the extent that programs expectations had been met; and (3) reactions to various aspects of the teaching-learning process. (LMO)

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EVALUATION OF EXTENSION IN-SERVICE EDUCATION: RITUAL OR PRECURSOR OF PROGRAM EXCELLENCE?

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Evaluation of Extension In-Service Education:
Ritual or Precursor of Program Excellence?

Introduction and Purpose

Excellence is a continuing concern of the Cooperative Extension Service. For Extension, the ultimate measure of excellence rests with the quality of service provided people in helping them to meet their informational and educational needs. The foundation of Extension's excellence is its field staff, whose competence in subject content and educational process, and dedication to service to others are vital to achieving the highest levels of organizational performance. Important in the development and maintenance of field staff competence and motivation is a well defined and comprehensive system of in-service education. And, important to the effectiveness of such a system is a continuing process of evaluation designed to maximize program quality and organizational responsiveness to staff educational needs.

The Florida Cooperative Extension Service, like other state Extension services, recognizes the importance of faculty in-service education. Numerous programs for field staff are conducted each year by Extension specialists, researchers and others. Program quality is an organizational priority, with a process of continuing evaluation of in-service offerings strongly encouraged and supported.

Although a strong emphasis on evaluation of in-service education has existed within the Florida Extension Service for several years, there has been little formal assessment of the nature, scope and use of the evaluations actually carried out. Certain insights have been gained through evaluation specialists assisting other specialists in the development of end-of-meeting and other evaluation instruments. However, there is not a comprehensive understanding of the attitudes of Extension specialists toward evaluation of in-service education, the kinds and scope of evaluative information that specialists feel to be important, and the uses that are made of the information gathered. The specific purposes of this study are, therefore:

1. To investigate the attitudes of Extension specialists toward in-service education evaluation.
2. To determine the extent to which Extension specialists are evaluating in-service education programs for which they have responsibility.
3. To determine the kinds of in-service education evaluation information considered by Extension specialists to be important.
4. To determine the uses being made of the evaluation information collected.

Such information should aid evaluation specialists in assisting in-service educators in better meeting their evaluation needs, as well as potentially contribute to the Extension organization's goal of program excellence by identifying areas for strengthening the overall in-service education evaluation process.

Review of Literature

The literature of evaluation, and of personnel training and development, identify a number of focal areas for evaluation of in-service education programs. Anderson, et. al., (1975) indicates that in the typical evaluation of such programs the basic effort is directed toward determining the extent to which objectives that primarily focus on increased knowledge, understanding, and/or skills have been reached. Lynton and Pareek (1967) agree that determining the extent objectives are reached is a basic question in evaluating training programs. They add that collecting data at various post-training stages adds significance to the evaluation by showing the stability of gains and the extent to which they survived transfer to the work situation.

Harless (1973) refers to the evaluation of programs in terms of their objectives as program validation. He argues, however, that program validation alone is not enough, pointing out that those evaluating training programs must also look at transfer (Are the skills/knowledge learned in the program exhibited on the job?) and effectiveness (Does the instruction solve the performance problem it was intended to solve?) Both Lynton

and Harless point out that evaluation of transfer and effectiveness must include consideration of compatibility of program objectives with the larger goals of the organization. They state that if program objectives and organization goals are not compatible, then the "best" of training programs have no chance to be effective. Harless considers it important also to identify and take into account organizational barriers to participant application of what is learned, such as inopportunity for immediate application, changes in job assignment or focus, etc.

Anderson points out two additional factors, worth and acceptance, as essential in the evaluation of in-service programs. "Worth" involves determining if programs are cost effective, i.e., are benefits accuring to the organization from in-service education efforts worth the expense? "Acceptance" encompasses both the technical accuracy of the training and the reactions of participants and supervisors to it. He states that the former is generally assessed by content examination by subject-matter specialists; the latter by critiques by program participants and relevant others. Anderson points out that acceptance testing has acquired a questionable name in some circles, because a "happiness index" has sometimes been the only form of evaluation that has taken place. Smith and Woeste (1983) indicate that one of the most common evaluations of Extension in-service education efforts is participant reaction in terms of enjoyment. They point out that reactions in this dimension alone provide no indication of the real value of the training to the participant or to the organization and provide no data for improving the program for future repetitions. However, Anderson sees the assessment of acceptance as a useful adjunct to measures of program validity, transfer, effectiveness, and worth.

Steele (1980) encompasses various types of evaluative information within the scope of "end of meeting" information gathering processes. Types of evaluative information suggested as easily collectable and meaningful to obtain are: (1) participant reactions to program context, content, and teacher performance; and, (2) participant perceptions

as to attainment of program objectives, general benefits of the program, gains in knowledge, attitudes and/or skills, and personal commitment to action. Other types of information suggested as useful include (1) information for future programs, including need for futher information on the topic, other areas where programs desired, and preferred logistics, and (2) selected background information on participant characteristic and relevant situational factors. Steele suggests that such information would be useful not only for program improvement and decision making, but also for personal accountability.

Most of the previous views of in-service training/education evaluation have focused on the "post program" stage. Smith and Woeste indicate that gathering information about a program after it has been completed is the most often used approach in evaluation, and is necessary to judge ultimate value or results. However, they identify two other stages, pre-implementation and during-implementation, where evaluation is also important. "Pre-implementation evaluation" is focused on the quality of planning with emphasis given to assessment of such areas as worthiness of objectives, appropriateness of program to situation, appropriateness of course content/activities to objectives, appropriateness of preprogram publicity, qualifications of staff, efficiency of resources planned, and comprehensiveness of evaluation plans. "During-implementation" evaluation is focused on the ongoing program with emphasis given to assessment of appropriateness of participants, fit of actual and planned activites, appropriateness of facilities, and effectiveness of instructors. Steele and others encompass a number of the above aspects within their concept of post-program assessment.

Kirkpatrick (1967), Bennett (1976), and Smith and Woeste describe similar levels or categories for evaluation of the post-program stage. The areas identified include participant reactions (level of participant enjoyment, perceived benefit and usefulness), increase in learning (changes in knowledge, attitudes and/or skills), behavioral changes (changes in practices, transfer of learning), and end results (organizational benefits, payoffs of training, job performance, etc.)

Nadler (1970) sees the end results dimension as being of greatest significance, indicating that the ultimate focus of evaluation of training should be on the post-training job performance of the participant. He adds that a serious limitation to this approach is often lack of data on job performance prior to the training effort, and emphasizes that a base line is important if an adequate assessment of training impact is to be otained.

The above literature appears to encompass two broad purposes for in-service education evaluation. One is program improvement, the other is accountability. In program improvement, the various kinds of information are used to potentially increase educational excellence of program offerings by providing a basis for decisions about modification of ongoing or recurring programs, and in the development of new ones. In accountability the evaluation information is useful in reporting program accomplishments to those who sit in judgement of the stewardship of the educational efforts. The soundness of the basis for both program adjustment and accountability is therefore directly related to the scope and quality of the evaluation process.

Methodology

Data were collected through open ended telephone interviews with 20 state Extension specialists. The interviewees were selected from 35 specialists listed in the 1983-1984 Florida Cooperative Extension Service Professional Development Opportunities Booklet as being in charge of one or more in-service education programs during that period. An attempt was made to reach all specialists listed, but time and other factors precluded accomplishment of this goal. However, the specialists interviewed did represent a general cross section of academic departments and Extension program areas within the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

The interviewees were asked to describe the kinds of evaluative information that was most useful to them with regard to their in-service education programs, and the

ways in which the information was being utilized. Follow-up questions were used as appropriate to increase comprehensiveness of response. Responses regarding kinds of information considered most useful were validated through content analysis of evaluation instruments. Specialists' orientations toward the evaluation process were deduced from response to the above questions.

Findings

Extent to Which Extension Specialists Evaluating In-Service Education Programs

All Extension specialists interviewed indicated routinely doing some type of "end of program" evaluation of their in-service education offerings. Eighty-five percent utilized a formal evaluation process/instrument of some type. The remainder relied simply on listening for participant comments. Interviewees did not specifically identify the pre-implementation evaluation dimension within the scope of their evaluation efforts. However, this may have been because they tended to think of this dimension as encompassed within program planning. In addition, a number of the during-implementation evaluation categories identified the literature were encompassed within the interviewees "end of program" evaluation efforts. Their primary evaluation focus, therefore, was on collecting evaluation information at program conclusion.

Kinds of In-Service Education Evaluation Information Considered by State Extension Specialists to be Important

Based on the interviews, as much as 99 percent of the evaluation information obtained is at the "reaction" level. This was verified by reviewing a sample of instruments utilized by specialists over the past five years. Most of the instruments were designed to obtain only reactive type information.

The reactive information obtained is substantially beyond the "happiness index" level, however. The evaluative information that ranks highest among the specialists is related to the educational content of the program. The specialist seemed to have the greatest interest in the perceptions of the program participants as to the helpfulness and usefulness of the program content and teaching materials in planning and implementing their own programs at the county or area level.

The kind of evaluation information that appeared to rank second in importance to the specialists was also related to program content. The specialists wanted to know if the participants perceived the content as meeting the program objectives, i.e., if the training was on target and congruent with expectations of what the training was to achieve.

The third most valuable evaluation information was participant perceptions of the teaching-learning process. Included were such aspects as how well the speakers performed, the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the topic, the methods of teaching (hands-on, lecture, field trip, etc.), comfort of the room, and location of the training.

A few of the specialists had attempted to assess the amount learned by the participants. This had been attempted in two ways, (1) by obtaining participant's perceptions of the amount learned, and (2) by administering formal pre and post-program tests of knowledge and skills. A very limited amount of evaluation data at this level is being obtained by Florida Extension specialists.

Interviews revealed that practically no in-service education evaluation is being done by Extension specialists either at the practice or end results levels, although a need was expressed by two specialists for data at these levels, primarily for personal accountability purposes. Likewise, there was no indication of any attempts to assess cost-effectiveness of in-service education programs.

One of the most useful kinds of "end of program" information indicated by specialists related to future programs. Evaluation instruments and specialist interviews indicated that participant suggestions were consistently sought regarding future program content, location, delivery methods, program frequency, and length. Practically all those interviewed obtained this type of information as part of their evaluation effort.

Use of Evaluation Information by Extension Specialists

Most of the specialists interviewed who were conducting in-service education programs indicated that they used the results in an attempt to improve future programs. However, about 10 percent of the specialists indicated their in-service education programs were not repeated, therefore the information was of little use to them from a program improvement perspective. Specialists indicated that they individually studied the evaluation results to obtain insights about program adjustments, as well as sharing the information with planning committees for their use in the program planning process.

Specialists make little use of in-service program evaluation information for accountability purposes, other than to themselves. A small number were providing the information to their department chairpersons as a basis for performance appraisal. Only one of those interviewed was sharing the results with program participants. Although, program deans were receiving a few evaluation reports from selected specialists, practically no accountability information was being provided to middle and upper administrative personnel.

All of the specialists indicated using the evaluation information in a self-accountability sense. That is, they were interested in "how well they had done" with the in-service education effort, and were using the information to establish an "index" of their own performance.

Specialists Attitudes Toward In-Service Education Evaluation

Interviews indicate a positive attitude by Florida Extension specialists toward evaluation of in-service education, at least at the levels of evaluation currently being implemented. Specialists perceived the kinds of information being collected as useful, and, in large part, adequate for their needs. From an exchange theory standpoint, the rewards from the data collected apparently are perceived as outweighing the costs of collection.

Whether this positive balance would remain in an expanded evaluation situation (i.e., movement to formal assessment of changes in participant knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes, practice change (transfer), and/or end results of training, etc.) is uncertain. The willingness of specialists to invest resources necessary to evaluate at these levels would appear to be a function, in part, of one or more factors. One potential factor would be the level of desire by the specialist to do the best in-service education job possible, and perceiving evaluative data beyond the reactions level as a viable means of helping to reach this goal. A second potential factor would be the specialists' perception of need by the organization for expanded accountability information for use with funding bodies and other external groups. At present, a need in this area does not appear to be perceived by those specialists interviewed, at least as far as in-service education evaluation in concerned. A third potential factor would be a perceived need for expanded data for use in personal accountability, particularly with regard to individual performance appraisal. In only one instance did a specialist indicate a need for expanded data for use in this sense. A fourth potential factor would be the level of leadership provided by evaluation specialists in (1) helping other specialists analyze the potential value and use of expanded levels of evaluation information in strengthening the quality of their in-service education offerings, and in providing information useful for accountability purposes; (2) assisting specialists in the design of evaluation approaches, instruments, and processes; and, (3) assisting in data collection, analysis, and reporting of results.

Summary

In summary, in-service education evaluation is more than just a ritual for Florida Extension specialists. The information is perceived by specialists to make a valuable contribution to program excellence. Eighty-five percent of the specialists interviewed conducted formal evaluations of their in-service education efforts.

Information collected was primarily perceptual and reactive, but encompassed a variety of program aspects. Considered of greatest importance by specialists were participant perceptions of the usefulness of the content of the training. Ranking second were perceptions of the extent that programs expectations had been met, and third were reactions to various aspects of the teaching-learning process.

Few specialists attempted to assess participant learning, either through participant perceptions or formal pre/post tests. There was also little attempt to formally assess transfer of information/skills, or ultimate results of that transfer.

"Non-evaluative" kinds of information indicated as most useful and generally collected as part of the evaluation effort were suggestions for the content and mechanics of future programs.

Extension specialists interviewed indicated much use of the evaluative information for program improvement, but little use in accountability, and perceived little organizational demand for use in an accountablility sense.

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